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OUT OF THE CLOSET

Gays seek acceptance in conservative community

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By **Warren Epstein, D'Arcy Fallon** and **Cate Terwilliger/** Gazette Telegraph

They came out of classrooms and offices, out of factories and restaurants.

They came out of closets.

In the first public show of unity in Colorado Springs' gay community, several hundred gay men and women came out to attend hearings on proposed state and city laws that would have banned discrimination against gays.

This loosely organized gay-rights lobby suffered a setback April 23 when the City Council directed the city Human Relations Commission to remove "sexual orientation" from a proposed law banning discrimination against minorities. Still, about 50 gays carried signs and chanted slogans outside a May 21 hearing on the revised proposed ordinance.

While these first major expressions of gay unity in Colorado Springs have encouraged some gays to become more open, others have stayed in the closet.

Some who talked to reporters for this profile of the city's gay community wouldn't allow their full names to be used, citing fear for their safety, jobs, families and homes.

But more than 40 gays did agree to be interviewed on the record about who they are, what they do and what their lives are like in Colorado Springs.

They echoed the sentiments of Denver psychologist Martha Pearse, a lesbian and president of the Colorado Psychological Association.

"To not be able to say who you are is to say you are bad," she says. "We're just like everybody else, really."

Gays in Colorado Springs are doctors, lawyers, therapists, engineers, professors, baby sitters, bus drivers, artists, students, military men and women. They are young, old, white, minorities, singles, couples, families.

Gays are concerned about their careers, their homes, their relationships, their families — their lives.

Wanting to live these lives fully, wanting the social contacts and sense of belonging the straight world rarely offers them, gays search for community.

Bars are a focal point

The first stop on the search often is the gay bar. Colorado Springs has two — the Exit Lounge and the Hide & Seek, which cater primarily to men. A third, The Hour Glass Lounge, caters primarily to a mixed clientele of lesbians and straight men.

When the Hide & Seek opened 19 years ago, it was popular with gay men looking for sex partners. Straights also went to the bar for dancing, drag shows and concerts.

But when the AIDS epidemic began in the early '80s, straights began avoiding gay bars. So did many gays, as the one-night stand became less popular.

"Our business went way down," says Joe Brady, owner of the Hide & Seek. "Now people go out more as a social function, to go out with their friends or their other halves, than to pick somebody up."

Health department statistics support Brady's observation.

In 1981, gay men accounted for 16 percent of all male gonorrhea cases in El Paso County. In 1990 that figure was down to .4 percent. Transmission of the AIDS virus in the county has virtually stopped, says John Potterat, director of the Sexually Transmitted Diseases-AIDS Control Program at the El Paso County Department of Health.

Potterat believes the reason for this decline in sexually transmitted diseases is that gay men are engaging more in safe sex and long-term relationships.

Bars are also targets

Still, the gay bar remains the social center for much of the gay community, and a milestone for many in the coming-out process.

Bill Landau grew up in the Corn Belt, where, he says, "I didn't recognize at the time that I was gay. I always thought if you were gay, you had a high, squeaky voice and a limp wrist and you minced down the street."

The 49-year old computer consultant went to his first gay bar, in the San Francisco area, 27 years ago. "I'd ask, 'Who are the gay people in here?' and they'd say, 'They're all gay.' "

Downtown restaurateur David Eidson, president of the Pikes Peak Gay and Lesbian Community Center, says that feeling of belonging is what makes gay bars

See **GAYS**/D6

"It would be so much ~~easier for us~~ if more people knew us personally, and the type of people we are — just like any others."
medical technologist Claudia Stafford

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"We have some of the same problems. We argue about how the other one squeezes the toothpaste tube. But the difference is that we can't go out and kiss in a restaurant."
Debora Contreras, co-founder of the Womyn's Theatre Collective and New Phazes, a lesbian newsletter.

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"He wanted to be a father, he wanted to be a husband. He knew what he'd be missing."
Hugh McGeehan, talking about his gay son Patrick

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"He died in my arms. I stayed over there two more years just to get even."
a Vietnam veteran and high school teacher, about his lover

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"I see the gay community here as large, but quite closeted. Many gays want to protect their identity because they fear losing their jobs."
attorney Robin Miller

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"It's like being Miss America. Everyone knows I'll never be Miss America, but over here I can feel like her."
Anita Baez, drag queen at the Hide & Seek

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"When you think about it, the only thing we share in common is the oppression."
retired UCCS professor Jacquelyn Beyer, on the diversity of gay people

Michele, left, and Carol duBois, who share a legally adopted surname, play with their son Evan, 3.

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OUT OF THE CLOSET

Networks help gays struggling to survive in a straight world

From D1

appealing. "You don't have to worry about the person next to you saying, 'Oh, he's a fag.' "

But for all the freedom they offer, the bars have a dark side.

They are targets for gay-bashers: Young men armed with bats have attacked gay men in the alley behind the Hide & Seek, and have broken headlights of cars parked there, says former day manager Randy Toddish.

One gay man was attacked near his west-side home after celebrating New Year's Eve at the Hide & Seek. Doctors used 48 stitches to sew his nose and lip wounds, and he has had reconstructive nasal surgery. The two attackers called him "faggot" while punching and kicking him, the man says.

A 22-year-old man has been charged with third-degree assault, a misdemeanor, in the attack.

The Colorado Springs Police Department doesn't keep separate records on gay-related assaults, but spokesman Lt. Rich Resling believes that gay-bashing, like rape, is an underreported crime.

Many of the victims fear reporting will "out" — publicly reveal — them as gays, he says.

Alcoholism a danger

The bars also feed an illness that targets gay men and women in high numbers.

Alcoholism is three to five times more common among gays than straights, says certified addictions counselor Vicky DuVal, a straight woman who works with many gay clients.

year, the workers in his division sent flowers to the funeral.

"HP is a pretty amazing place," he says. "As long as you do your job and do it well, they don't care what else you do."

Other gays have been less fortunate. Rumors of gays fired for their sexual orientation circulate regularly through the gay community.

Roland Valdez, director of the Human Relations Commission, says that some of the 3,400 discrimination complaints his office receives each year involve sexual orientation. But the commission doesn't tabulate gay complaints separately. And, because Colorado Springs has no law that specifically protects gays, the commission doesn't investigate complaints involving sexual orientation.

Military careers are among the most sensitive for gays. "Homosexuality is incompatible with military service," according to military regulations. The military excludes gays from service, and typically discharges those it discovers.

The October court martial of Fort Carson dentist Col. Edward Modesto sent a clear message to other gay soldiers. Modesto was found guilty of conduct unbecoming to a military officer for having oral sex with a male lover, and for performing in drag at a local gay bar. He served 6½ months in prison at Fort Leavenworth, Kan., and was dishonorably discharged from the Army.

The case sent other gay soldiers deep into the closet.

Hide & Seek owner Brady says his bar has always been popular with gay soldiers, but that after the Modesto

The pink triangle, which is similar in design to the yellow triangle used by the Nazis in the 1930s and '40s to tag homosexuals, has been adopted by the gay community as a symbol of universal solidarity.

▲ Drag queens, from left, Crazy Diane, Roxy and Veronica put on their makeup and dresses before performing at the Hide & Seek

What I typically see is somebody who . . . becomes cognizant of being different. Dealing with their own internalized homophobia at a very vulnerable age, many of them start drinking to deal with these feelings."

For restaurant manager Mark Lyda, performing in drag shows as Lyda Rose is a way to deal with those feelings.

"When I first came out in the gay world, I was shy and very unsure of myself," Lyda says after lip-syncing Tina Turner's "You Better Be Good To Me" at the Hide & Seek. "Doing drag shows helped me open the doors toward accepting myself as a person. It made me more comfortable with the lifestyle."

Separate culture built

A tradition at men's bars, drag shows also are a part of the predominantly male United Court. The 15-year-old Colorado Springs chapter of the national United Court is the oldest and largest of the city's 11 gay organizations.

"I think of the court as a service club along the lines of Rotary or Shriners," says Chris Jones, the court's prince royal. "They don't wear dresses, but otherwise it's pretty much the same thing."

In the past year, the court has raised more than $10,000 for charities, including children's and seniors' assistance organizations and the Southern Colorado AIDS Project.

Another gay organization is the Colorado Springs Gay Rodeo Association, a group of 50 men and women. The association plans to have its first rodeo Sept. 21-22 at Penrose Stadium.

Gay culture also extends to the arts and literature. Some Colorado Springs gays participate in mainstream theater troupes and others perform in gay troupes.

The Up-Start Theatre Company, a mixed gay-straight troupe, recently completed its second production, "Crimes of the Heart," at the Hide & Seek.

The Womyn's Theatre Collective, a lesbian troupe, was co-founded 12 years ago by Debora Contreras. "The reason we started the Womyn's Theatre Collective is you don't often see plays written by women," Contreras says. "I'm personally interested in what women have to say, and so are a lot of other people."

Abaton Books, which carries lesbian literature and jewelry as part of its emphasis on women's issues, opens this week in Old Colorado City.

Gays work to keep jobs

Chris Jones is glad he doesn't have to worry about losing his job because he's gay.

A software engineer for Hewlett-Packard Co., Jones says his company accepts his lifestyle. After his longtime partner died of AIDS last

"Gay men and women are not as cohesive as we'd like. But we all went to the civil rights meeting. We were out in force and it felt pretty darned good. I'd never seen our community represented like that before."

Chris Jones, a software engineer for Hewlett-Packard and a member of the United Court

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court-martial, their patronage dropped by about 25 percent.

But gays in the military find ways to avoid discovery. A gay Air Force staff sergeant married a lesbian civilian because it lifted him above suspicion and provided her with the financial benefits of a military spouse while leaving them free to live virtually separate lives.

Such marriages are common, the sergeant says. A Pentagon spokesman says there isn't enough information to argue the point.

"Unless it comes out in the open, there's no way for us to know about it, says Pentagon spokesman Maj. Joe Padilla. "Once it becomes known, then proper action is taken. Those people are dismissed."

Gay children stay silent

Some gays say that if their parents knew they were gay, they'd be dismissed by their families.

Most parents have a hard time accepting that their child is gay.

The problem lies in parental expectations that usually include marriage and parenthood for their children, says Alan Cook, a gay psychotherapist who leads a support group for family and friends of gays.

"There's a grieving process," says Cook.

Hugh McGeehan agrees. When his 23-year-old son Patrick told him several years ago that he was gay, he grieved.

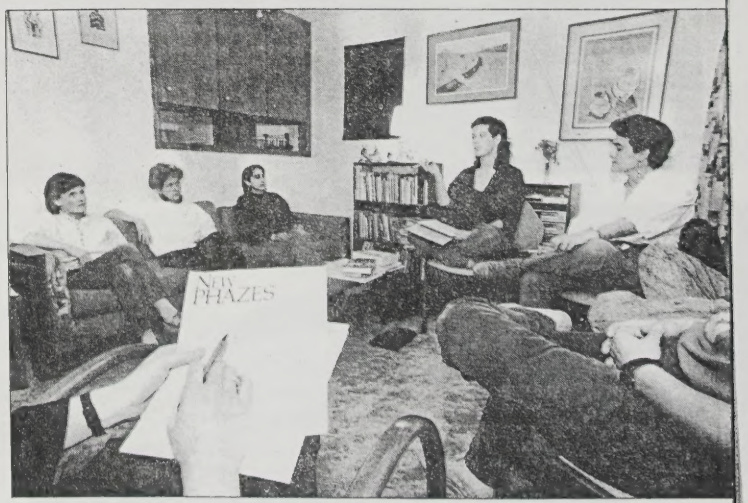
Hugh and Eva McGeehan had raised their four children in the Catholic church and had sent them to parochial schools.

Hugh McGeehan recalls the bitter arguments he and his son had after Patrick came out, especially the argument after they visited a psychiatrist together, seeking a treatment for Patrick.

"It reached a point where I, in desperation, said, 'Why did you choose to be gay?' And Patrick, breaking down, said, 'Choose to be gay? Do you think I chose to be gay? Did you choose to be heterosexual?'

"Until that point, my prayers had been focused on, 'Oh God, give Patrick strength to do what is right.' Now my prayers are, 'Oh, God, give Patrick the strength to do what you think is right for him."

▲ Randy Toddish, left, plays Scrabble with Paul Grantham at Lambda House, a transition house in Colorado Springs for people with AIDS. A former manager at the Hide & Seek, Toddish devotes much of his time to quietly helping AIDS patients. While he does his share of behind-the-scenes work, he says there is also a time to stand up and be counted. "You get a lot done quietly," he says. "But not everything."



▶ Debora Contreras, second from right, leads a meeting of the volunteer staff of New Phazes, a lesbian newsletter with 400 subscribers. The 3-year-old monthly is one of several social/political outlets for local gays and their loved ones. Others include the recently formed chapters of Queer Nation, a gay activist group, and P-FLAG, a support group for friends and family of gays.

For Tami Gaylor, a registered nurse raised in a conservative Methodist family, coming out to her parents has continued to be a source of pain.

"I was doing something I had been taught was a sin — evil, dark," says Gaylor, the oldest of four children.

Two years into her first relationship with another woman, she decided to call her parents and tell them.

"I was very in love and I was very happy," she says. "I was feeling separated from them because I couldn't share the most important part of my life."

Gaylor's parents told her they loved her but would never accept her lesbianism. They also sent her literature from an organization of ex-gays who say Christianity led them to heterosexuality.

No dad — just 'donor'

In the eyes of the law, they're not married, but Michele and Carol duBois say they are as connected as any heterosexual couple. They share a legally adopted surname, household and financial responsibilities — and 3-year-old Evan.

Carol, 32, Evan's birth mother, is "Mama," while Michele, 29, is "Mumsy."

. The trio performs regularly with fellow drag queens Anita Baez and Lyda Rose.

▲ If I never take any risks, I'll never grow," says Maggie Abrams, left, owner of Abrams Jewelry Design in Old Colorado City. Being open about sexual orientation is "a part of your maturity and growth as a gay person," says Abrams, who attempted suicide and then sought therapy in her struggle for self-acceptance. Now she openly shares her personal and professional life with Jenny Hickman, right.

When a visitor asks about Evan's father, there's a gentle reproof: "We don't say 'father,' we say 'donor,' " says Carol, a systems support specialist for Digital Equipment Corp. "The person is a biological father but has none of the 'daddy' attributes."

"When Evan asks about his father, we'll say some nice man gave his sperm so we could make a baby," Michele says. "That's his tie to the donor."

Carol became pregnant in a doctor's office after she was inseminated with the sperm from an anonymous donor.

The couple is trying for a second child, but this time Michele, a software specialist for Stanford Telecommunications, will be the birth mother. She undergoes monthly inseminations.

The women's commitment to parenting echoes their commitment to each other. Five years ago, they celebrated their relationship with a "holy union" ceremony — the gay, non-legal equivalent of a heterosexual wedding.

As for what they tell Evan about their relationship, "We don't have to explain it at this point," says Carol. "He sees it. There's nothing unusual about it to him. He knows we love each other."

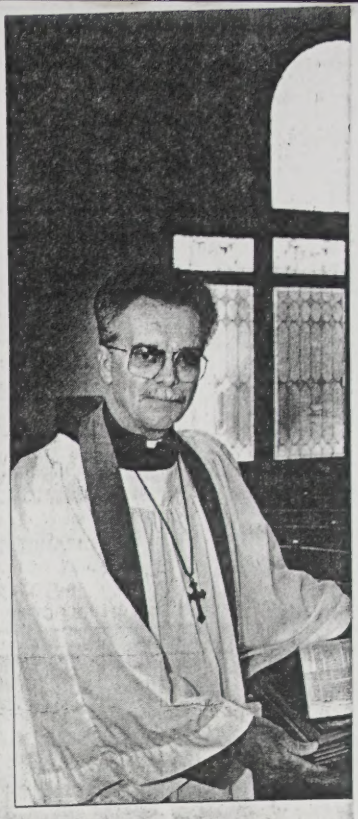
Evan gets plenty of one-on-one time with men, Carol says. "We have a lot of male friends. Some straight, some gay, some single, some in relationships."

Living with two dads

A former Air Force officer, 36, and his partner, a 29-year-old actor/model, have lived together 2½ years.

They have a joint checking account, joint ownership of a car — and a family pass to the Cheyenne Mountain Zoo. The former officer's three children, ages 10, 11 and 12, spend weekends, holidays and part of the summer with their father and his partner, whom they call their stepfather.

(The names of the father, his partner and his children are not used here to protect the privacy of the children.)



The father says his 12-year-marriage ended when he realized he was gay.

Although the children accept that their father is gay, they worry about their classmates' reactions.

Kids in elementary and junior high school don't understand what it's like to have a gay father, the children say.

That seems hardest on the 12-year-old daughter.

"I'm embarrassed (for her father's partner to come to school) because so many people joke," she says. "They don't know what gay people are really like."

Her father's partner acknowledges her conflicting feelings.

"She comes up against it," he says. "She'll say, 'Fags are just so terrible.' I'll say, 'Excuse me, but you know at least two.' "

The father, a night stock clerk at Cub Foods, dismisses the criticism that gay parents are poor role models for their children.

"What is a good role model?" he says. "I'm loving and caring. This thing that because you're gay you're less of a man, less of a father. That's just one aspect of who I am."

Church offers compassion

One Sunday morning, a woman holding a Bible stood outside the Pikes Peak Metropolitan Community Church as Wayne Johnson stepped out on the patio for a smoke. Inside, the Rev. Marion C. Harrison, 58, was preaching to a mostly gay congregation.

The woman told Johnson he was going to hell for listening to "that man."

Johnson replied in his best drop-dead Texarkana accent: "Madam, 'that man' is my husband."

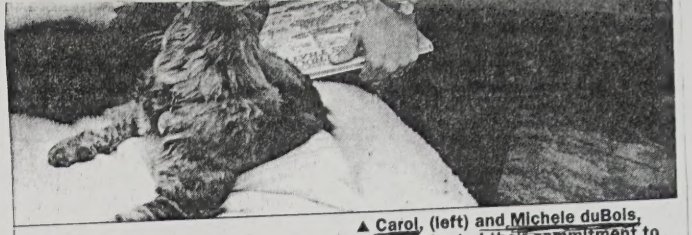
Johnson and Harrison have lived together more than six years. They expect to grow old together.

Twenty-five years ago, Marion Harrison was married, the father of four, and the pastor of a large United Church of Christ congregation in southern Illinois.

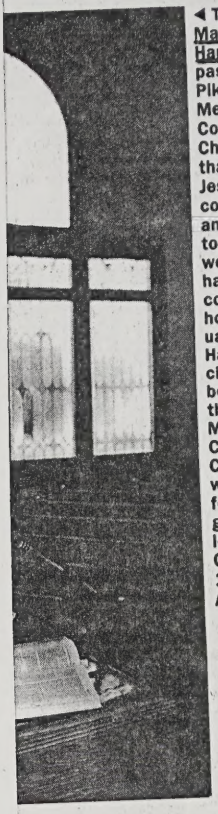
When he told his congregation he was gay, he lost his job, his wife and family, and his status in the community.

But while he felt isolated from other Christians and society, he says, he never lost his faith in God or his belief that Jesus never would have condemned homosexuality.

Harrison says that while the New Testament doesn't quote Jesus on the



▲ Carol, (left) and Michele duBois, who celebrated their commitment to each other five years ago in a "holy union" ceremony, try to coax their son, Evan, 3, into taking his bedtime medicine. The bedtime ritual usually includes several rounds of "Old MacDonald" — with such Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle embellishments as "with a cowabunga here and a cowabunga there."



◀ The Rev. Marion C. Harrison, pastor of Pikes Peak Metropolitan Community Church, says that because Jesus taught compassion and tolerance, He wouldn't have condemned homosexuality. Harrison's church belongs to the national Metropolitan Community Church, which was founded by gay and lesbian Christians in 1968 in Los Angeles.

subject of homosexuality, it does quote Him extensively on the need for compassion and tolerance.

Harrison says he has found his own niche, ministering to gays and lesbians.

"The folks walking through the door are seeking a church home without the restrictions and reinforced biblical harassments that occur in other churches," Harrison says. There are 50 members of his church, and would be more if people weren't being harassed for attending, he says.

He looks forward to the day when gays and lesbians can be open about their feelings.

"People are sick and tired of being two people. It's demeaning and dehumanizing."

Coming out in the '40s

Jacquelyn Beyer didn't have a word for the feelings she was experiencing as a University of Colorado student in the '40s.

"I was totally naive, mooning over Vivien Leigh in movies," says Beyer, 66, a retired University of Colorado at Colorado Springs geography professor.

Searching for information, Beyer went to the university library in Boulder, where she found just two books — locked in the librarian's closet. The books characterized homosexuality as both deviant and a sickness.

Beyer came out in an atmosphere of fear, censorship and omission. She didn't know of the lively cultural and intellectual life that authors/partners

"I'm just tired of the misconceptions about our lifestyle and choices. We're regular, normal people living regular, normal lives, only we have to fight a little harder for them."
Texas Spradlin

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Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas cultivated in Paris in the early 1900s. She didn't know that the ranks of gays and bisexuals included Julius Caesar, Leonardo da Vinci, Hans Christian Andersen, Walt Whitman, Virginia Woolf, Bessie Smith, Langston Hughes and James Baldwin.

Nor did she know that Eleanor Roo-

32-year relationship with Associated Press reporter Lorena Hickok.

The lack of information during the time that Beyer was coming out, and the general belief that homosexuality was a sickness, made gays an easy target for discrimination.

Still, gays looked for other gays, often in the private clubs that were the forerunners of gay bars. Some adopted stereotypical modes of speech, dress and behavior, and were easily identified by gays and straights alike.

"You could tell the motorcycle dykes, the bull dykes, a mile away," says Shelly, 61, a retired electronics inspector. "But other people in regular walks of life that weren't flashin' — it was a lot taken on the eye contact."

"Gadar" — the ability to intuitively spot and connect with other gays, or "family" — remains an important social tool for most gays.

"It is a subtle sixth sense that we all have to develop, and we still have to respect each other's sense of privacy," says medical technologist Claudia Stafford, 41.

Networks form slowly

Today, gays also can network through a variety of publications. Guides sold at gay bookstores list names, addresses, phone numbers and descriptions of gay organizations from Sioux City, Iowa, to Paris.

Colorado Springs gays stay up-to-date on news and events through two monthly publications. The Pikes Peak Gay/Lesbian Community Center newsletter, Gayspeak, is mailed to about 150 people. About 400 readers, mostly lesbians, subscribe to New Phazes, which includes news, reprinted articles from national publications, and support-group listings.

Although gay men and lesbians have drawn closer through such cooperative efforts as support for those with AIDS and for the gay-rights provision, differences remain.

While gay men often are involved in gay causes, lesbians may have broader political concerns. Many lesbians are particularly active in issues that affect all women, including sexism, abortion rights, domestic violence and rape.

"As long as I can remember, my energy has been given to women," says Maggie Abrams, owner of Abrams Jewelry Design. "And that has nothing to do with me as a sexual being."

There are other divisions within the community. In a city with a population that is 84 percent white, gay racial minorities often find themselves on the periphery of both racial and gay circles. Elderly gays also often are lonely.

"The older people I meet — they're not out, and not as politically interested as I am," Beyer says. Many older gay people are medically homebound or closeted, says Shelly, who is trying to organize a social group for gay men and lesbians over 55.

Such networks form slowly in a community gays uniformly describe as closeted and afraid, largely because of the city's military institutions and conservative political tradition.

"I know a doctor and a couple of lawyers (who are gay), and they're just scared to death to have their car seen outside a gay bar or a homosexual function," Bill Landau says. "There's just incredibly strong paranoia here."

That the city would consider a gay-rights provision has bolstered the ranks of openly gay men and women.

"It's tiring to live a lie every day," David Eidson says. "I would like to not worry about losing my business,

Sex/Its role debated

From D1

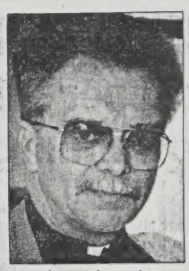
accepted."

To Jim, sin is sin. "God views all our sins equally," he says, "even though some sins have more serious consequences." Jim well knows one of the consequences of homosexual activity. He has been diagnosed as HIV-positive, meaning he may carry the AIDS virus.

"I've known about being HIV-positive for three and one-half years," he says, "and I was struggling with my fears about it for three years before that. But from my perspective it has been one of the healthiest things that has happened to me in terms of making me ask the right questions and working on being open to God's healing.

"It's been a source of pain and healing at the same time, but I want to make the most of the time I'm alive."

Leivers: Says he's just following Scripture.



Harrison: Gays just want freedom to move about.

Johnson: God does discriminate against gays.